

DATE:

NOV 24 1971

To : Phil Handler
Prof. Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
FROM : School of Medicine
Stanford University
Stanford, California 94305
SUBJECT: Authenticity of Scientific Advice: role of NAS

I know you are going through an agony over this. I wanted to call you today, but finding you out, I send this memo to prepare for a phone discussion. Would you call me back?

The detailed arguments can better be done over the phone. My operational suggestion is that the NAS membership be encouraged to play a more responsible role in the scrutiny of recommendations made by NAS committees, whose public reputation does rest to a large measure in the reputation of the membership of the whole academy.


Publication (following disinterested review) is of course the crucial process to sustain the authenticity of experimental science. NAS committee reports are of course published, but in a way that discourages pluralistic and responsible criticism from the membership, except in the most controversial and emotionally loaded situations. After a report is announced in the press, it will takes days or weeks before a member will learn of the text, perhaps receive it (at his own expense!) and then he has no convenient forum in which to respond, unless he means to make (literally) a federal case of it.

My proposal: that a privilege and responsibility of NAS membership is to receive gratis, and concurrently with any public release, the texts of any reports that invoke the authority of the NAS. Members will be invited to respond with critical (which means + or -) comments which will be retained on file at the Academy, and available to any inquirer for the cost of reproduction. By some now unspecified mechanism it may also be decided to publish these comments as appendices to the principal report. The cost of such an operation is not a legitimate criticism; it will be a small increment to the existing budget, and in my view likely to result in a great improvement in the quality of reports and in their credibility. As NAS is dragged or self-propelled into more and more controversial areas of inquiry, it becomes ever more important to sustain an example of open dialogue as opposed to authoritarian dicta. Models for such procedures are already well established in the federal bureaucracy (e.g. publication of proposed regulations in the Federal Register) as well as in the paradigms of the scientific process -- Polanyi's "Republic of Science" if you like. Members might also act as communicators (without prejudice + or -) of critical texts prepared by others,

One could also think of an analogue of the Federal Register, a Journal of the NAS which would record texts in sometimes less than elegant formats in a way that might save both time and(perhaps) money.

I look forward to going into this with you in more detail.

Sincerely,


(H/S) 32-1-1200 x 5801